

Student Voice in Feedback and Engagement: Auditing Student and Staff Academic Practices

Alaa Mohamed, Alex Jianoran, Tiyaana Khaldieh, Dr Jason Chu

1. Introduction

Student voice is critical in the sense of belonging and participation in higher education. When students are given the opportunity to actively shape their learning experience, this can foster a sense of inclusivity, ownership, and partnership. This can enable students to overcome any negative cognitive barriers, such as their own beliefs about their intelligence and academic capabilities (Chiriac, 2014; Lang, 2021).

It has been well established that constructive feedback on assessments and Blackboard engagement can be influential in the student learning journey. It helps students understand expectations, identify areas of improvement, and develop their research critical thinking skills. Conversely, inconsistent or limited feedback can lead to confusion, disengagement, and reduced confidence (Mercer and Gulseren, 2024; Middleton *et al.*, 2024). The relationship between how feedback is given, how it is received, and whether it is used is what remains poorly understood within the School of Life Sciences.

However, auditing these practices through a student lens alone would give an incomplete picture of the learning process. Educators can equally feel disheartened and disengaged with the teaching process when students do not engage with the formative and summative feedback process. In some instances, educators may not have informed or trained their students to value, understand and effectively engage with feedback; i.e. low feedback literacy (de Kleijn, 2023).

This project audited both student and staff practices to identify educational process gaps and areas of good practice, so that feedback and engagement align with students' needs and the University of Westminster's institutional values and educational strategy.

Research Questions:

- How do students understand and engage with constructive feedback?
- How does the quality of feedback affect feelings of academic support?
- How do staff and student perceptions of feedback and academic support diverge?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

All student and staff participants were registered within the School of Life Sciences at the University of Westminster. The sample consisted of 45 undergraduate students (from Level 3 Foundation to Level 6) and 21 academic staff. Students were drawn from seven degree programmes and across four levels of study, summarised in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Student participants by degree programme.

Programme	Number
Biomedical Science	33
Pharmacology & Physiology	4
Biochemistry	2
Human Nutrition	2
Biological Sciences	1
Medical Sciences	1
Other	2
Total	45

Table 2. Student participants by level of study.

Level of Study	Number
Level 3 (Foundation)	5
Level 4 (First Year)	3
Level 5 (Second Year)	16
Level 6 (Third Year)	21
Total	45

2.2. Data Collection

A mixed-methods approach was used to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from participants. Separate online surveys (via Microsoft Forms) were conducted for students and staff, capturing Likert-scale items and open-text responses on summative assessment feedback and Blackboard experiences.

Further qualitative data were collected through 45-minute focus group interviews (3-4 student participants per group), conducted by student researchers. These provided a more in-depth opportunity for the 9 recruited students to share experiences and perceptions on summative assessments and of their Blackboard experiences.

2.3. Learning Analytics

In addition, the academic lead on the project used Learning Analytics on Blackboard and Turnitin to assess feedback access and engagement across twenty-four Life Science modules (2022-2026) spanning Level 3 to Level 7. This included data on the number of active students on Blackboard Discussion Board (posting questions and responding with replies), engagement with Blackboard Announcements (opening the post), and Turnitin summative assessment feedback (opening the feedback after submission). Furthermore, the frequency with which academic staff

and module leaders used Blackboard Announcement pages and Discussion Boards was also considered.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Survey Findings (Likert-Scale Data)

Students and staff were asked a series of Likert-scale items on summative assessment feedback and on engagement with Blackboard. Response distributions are summarised in Figures 1-4 below.

Student Survey

● Strongly agree ● Agree ● Disagree ● Strongly disagree

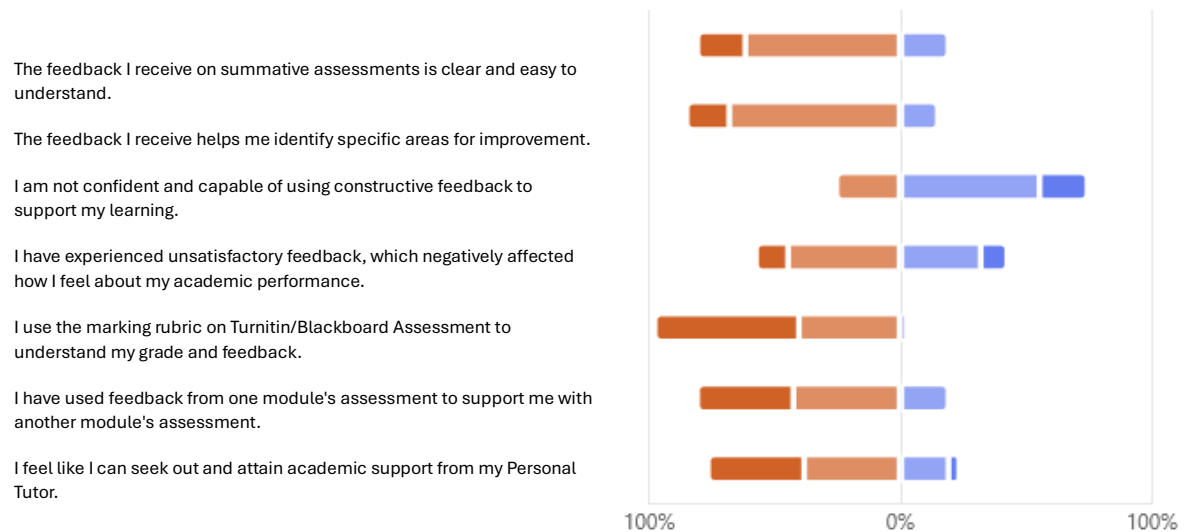


Figure 1. Student survey responses to summative assessment feedback (Likert-scale items).

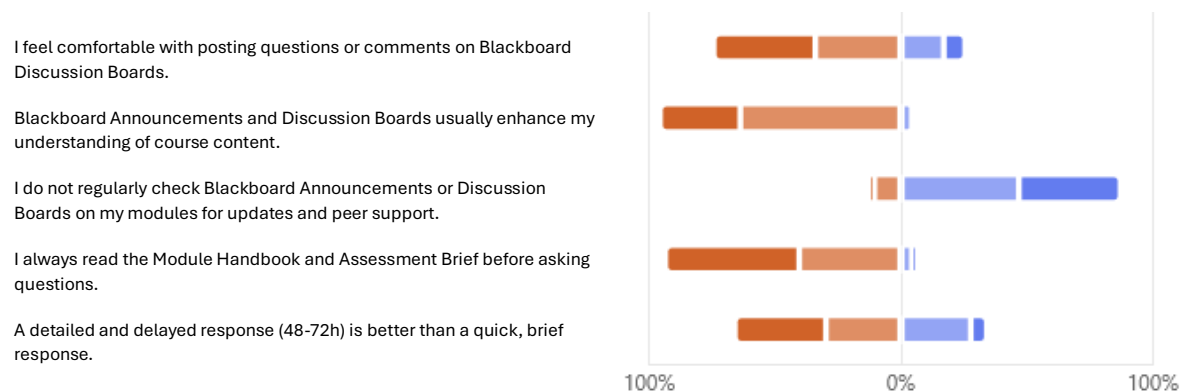


Figure 2. Student survey responses to engagement with Blackboard (Likert-scale items).

Staff Survey

● Strongly disagree ● Disagree ● Agree ● Strongly agree

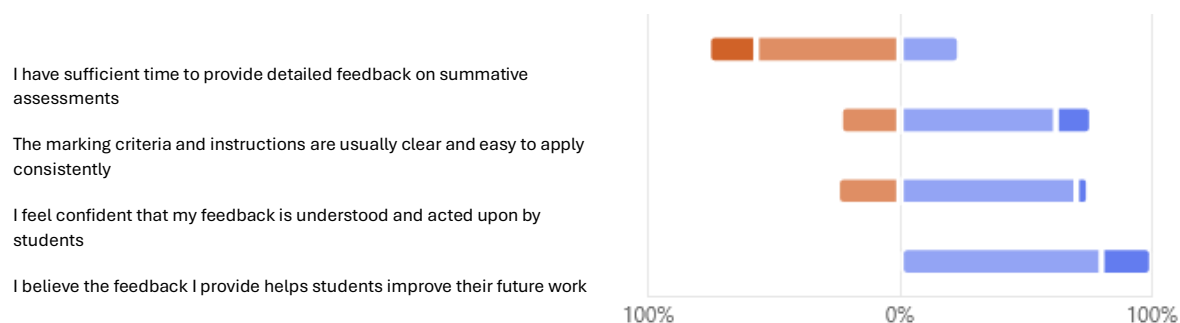


Figure 3. Staff survey responses to summative assessment feedback (Likert-scale items).

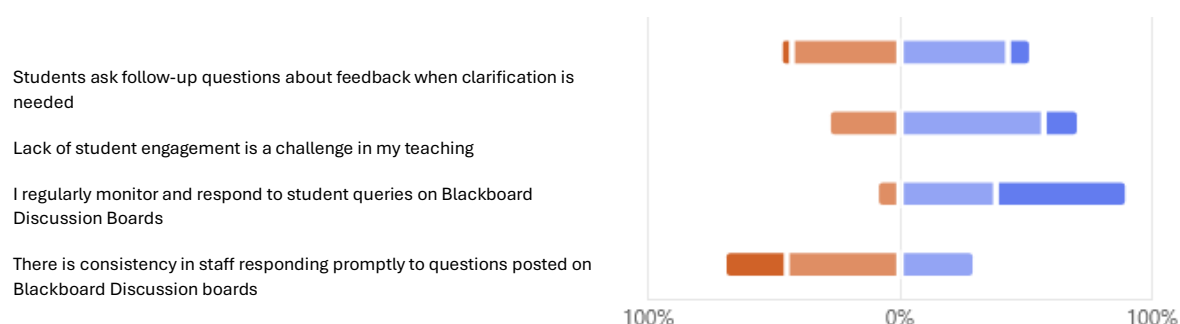


Figure 4. Staff survey responses to student engagement (Likert-scale items).

3.2. Learning Analytics Findings

Table 3 lists the modules included in the Blackboard and Turnitin analytics, together with the academic years covered and the module leader(s) responsible.

Table 3: Modules included in Blackboard and Turnitin analytics

Module Code	Academic Year	Module Leader(s)
3ACHE03DW.1	2023, 2024, 2025	Amy MacLatchy
3ACHE04DW.2	2023, 2024, 2025	Moonisah Usman, Amy MacLatchy
3BIOL003W.2	2024, 2025	Steve Davis
3BIOL004W.1	2023, 2024, 2025	Ximena Montano Hernandez
3CHEM004W.1	2023, 2024, 2025	Beth Sawyer, Karima Brimah
3PHYM002W.2	2023, 2024, 2025	Jason Chu
4BICH001W.1	2023, 2024, 2025	Sarah Coleman
4BIOL002W.2	2023, 2024, 2025	Oliver Haworth
4BIOM004W.1	2023	Joan Liu
4BIOM006W.1	2022, 2023, 2024, 2025	Jason Chu, Hershna Patel
4PHYM001W.2	2023, 2024, 2025	Lewis Mattin
5BICH001W.1	2023, 2024, 2025	Paul Curley
5BIOM010W.1	2023, 2024, 2025	Mo Yuksel, Andy Dalby

5BIOM001W.2	2022, 2023, 2024, 2025	Lorna Tinworth, Maria Neofytou
6BICH003W.Y	2023, 2024, 2025	Steve Getting
6BIOM003W.2	2022, 2023, 2024	Hassan Morad, Ian Harmer
6BIOM004W.1	2023, 2024, 2025	Priya Gururajan
6BIOM005W.1	2024, 2025	Elyn Xu, Nilu
7BIOM001W.2	2023	Mark Perry
7BIOM023W.2	2022, 2023, 2024, 2025	Antony Black, Polly Hayes
7HMNT021W.2	2024, 2025	Katie Bonnar, Chris Curtis
7HMNT010W.1	2025	Paul Hough
7HMNT013W.1	2025	Raysa El-Zein
7BIOM040W.1	2023, 2024, 2025	John Murphy

Table 4 summarises the percentage of the student cohort active on Blackboard Discussion Boards, organised by academic level. This was based on the number of students who submitted questions or responded, compared to the number registered on the module.

Table 4. Percentage of student cohort that is active on Blackboard Discussion Boards by academic level.

Level	Percentage of Active Cohort (%)
3	7%
4	12%
5	11%
6	9%
7	13%
Overall	10%

Table 5 shows student engagement with Turnitin feedback, calculated as the number of students viewing Turnitin feedback divided by the number of student submissions. The average % engagement by modules has been calculated as an average of all the module-specific data.

Table 5. Student engagement with Turnitin feedback, by assessment.

Assessment	Total Feedback Viewed	Total Submitted	AVG % Engagement by Modules
Coursework 1	9254	15637	53.4%
Coursework 2	1985	4302	45.5%
Coursework 3	903	2124	37.4%
Coursework 4	1033	1527	67.8%
		Overall AVG	51%

Blackboard analytics also indicated that engagement with Blackboard Announcements varied considerably across modules and individual posts, from low engagement (13%) to high (67%).

3.3. Thematic Findings from Qualitative Data

3.3.1. Feedback supports learning but lacks consistency

Students overwhelmingly recognise feedback as important for improving future performances, particularly in academic skills (n=45). Staff showed strong commitment to a feedforward and actionable feedback approach (n=17). A positive feedback experience also encouraged students to seek out further verbal clarification from academic staff, building their confidence and professionalism. Those who did so had greater potential for self-reflection and valued criticism as support for their learning rather than as a “personal attack”.

Student perspective – positive: Students valued detailed feedback, reflected on this, and intentionally used it to improve their marks, learning, and skills.

“It allowed me to not only improve my next portfolio but also make my CV better”.

“Had the chance to seek further clarification”

Staff perspective – positive: Staff described practice aimed at enabling students to use feedback for future assessments and their general learning experience, and believed they were enacting best practice in feedback literacy, framing this where possible in pedagogic care rather than administrative duty.

“trying to make the areas not only assessment specific but going forward they can implement in other areas”

“Stretch feedback to relevant topics they will see repeatedly through their degree”

“Students who have viewed the feedback have informed me that they appreciate the constructive feedback that they have received”

However, there were several instances where students experienced subpar feedback, usually in the form of insufficient detail (n=21). This can run the risk of undermining trust in the fairness of assessment and damages the credibility of feedback as a learning tool. One negative feedback experience can have a knock-on effect on any feedback experience that follows.

Student perspective – negative: The most frequently reported issue from students was experiences of feedback that lacked sufficient detail.

“The only feedback provided was brief comments such as ‘good’ or ‘great work’”.

“Did not explain the main reasoning behind my mistakes”.

“No negative feedback but lost marks for no reason”.

“Identifying what you have done correct is just as important as improvement feedback... received minimum positive feedback”.

When students receive feedback that lacks detail, is overly generic, or is not consistently actionable, students are left unsure of the steps required to improve. This may also be experienced alongside limited positive reinforcement and an unmet desire to have their strengths recognised.

Students also reported conflicting advice from different lecturers regarding summative assessment, along with inconsistency in the use of the marking rubric, written comments, and variable marking quality across the same cohort. This can produce frustration, disappointment,

and a reduced sense of students' ability to improve, and over time may contribute further to disengagement with the university learning process and undermine psychological safety (Mcclintock, Fainstad and Jauregui, 2022; Edmondson, 2024; Bump and Cladis, 2025).

This negative student experience may be due in part to structural constraints faced by staff. Many staff demonstrated a strong commitment to effective, dialogic, and compassionate teaching practices; however, this was set up against significant time pressure (a 15-working-day turnaround, plus Mitigating Circumstances/RAF processes), and marking workload (increasing student numbers against reducing academic staff), which may limit the depth of feedback (76% of staff; Figure 3).

3.3.2. Students actively engage with feedback but face practical barriers

Students demonstrated a willingness to engage with and apply feedback to their future learning and assessments. This challenged some staff perceptions and assumptions about widespread disengagement with feedback, which staff described as demotivating.

Staff perspective: Non-engagement with assessment feedback by students is frequently assumed by academic staff (n=9). There is asymmetry in visibility: staff marking is visible to students, but student engagement with feedback is largely invisible to staff. This can create emotional labour and a sense of wasted effort and time investment, a feeling that may be greater in larger cohorts.

"Some don't even open it"

"I question whether some engage with it at all"

"students often do not read the feedback fully... focussed on the score rather than the feedback"

"Limited, if judging by those viewing feedback on BB or asking me directly"

Students in this study, however, do describe actively using feedback to improve specific academic skills, such as referencing and report writing. They also describe reflecting on and revisiting previous submissions and applying advice from one module to others. As noted above, another example of proactive behaviour change following a positive feedback experience was the confidence to seek further clarification and advice from academic staff via appointments, meetings, and discussions.

However, structural barriers prevented meaningful follow-through for some students. Some students report managing work alongside their study commitments and tackling time management barriers. This is recognised by staff and is a known consideration with our student cohort.

"I worry that some of our students are quite lonely and isolated and find it difficult to make connections at uni' because we academics are always talking at them (we have to cover the curriculum) and then they have to rush off to their part-time jobs or other commitments. I wonder if, for too many, maybe their degree does not feel like a 'real' part of their lives and a scientific learning journey that we (students and academics) are sharing but rather something to get through as fast as possible. Something that we (academics) do to them for three years so that they can be 'awarded' a degree 'stamp' and then get back to their real lives?"

This was experienced alongside a perceived high workload, which led students to prioritise assessment completion in chronological order rather than according to workload demands or the holistic learning experience. Many students are still developing key professional skills, such as time management, and may not yet recognise that making mistakes and these desirable difficulties are an integral part of the learning process. Furthermore, again, feedback is often perceived as too specific to a particular assignment, which can make its broader applicability less apparent. To benefit fully from feedback, academic staff may need to provide more in-depth training for students to engage in proactive reflection, enabling them to map feedback to future assessments and learning contexts.

Additional challenges can arise when students struggle to understand the value or relevance of the feedback, or when they perceive it as insufficiently personalised. In such cases, students reported needing to seek further clarification or support from staff. While this can be beneficial, it requires additional initiative and effort, which some students may perceive as an extra burden, and consequently, a barrier to engaging with feedback effectively.

Staff aim to frame student engagement as relationship-building rather than merely academic compliance. This requires an emphasis on respect and curiosity throughout the learning process and an intent to create the university learning space with psychological safety, as a “safe space to fail” to learn (Edmondson, 2024). However, some staff were concerned that some students may fall into a grade-identity phenomenon, categorising themselves as “2:1 or 2:2 only students”. Staff intend to encourage student development through avenues such as formal feedback, but this does not translate consistently across all students' experiences.

3.3.3. Blackboard is effective for communication, but detrimental if not accessible

Blackboard was highly valued by students and staff for centralising module content (n=16) and for enabling peer-to-peer support through the Discussion Boards. Many staff responses on Blackboard were praised for being prompt and clear, supporting student learning and confidence.

Student perspective – positive: Students valued consistency, centralisation, and peer support on Blackboard, while also recognising that proactive student use supported a positive learning experience.

“module leaders consistently answers questions on Blackboard within 24-72 hours (or sooner)”.

“answered nicely and straightforward without asking you to keep looking back”.

“I regularly check the discussion board as I have lots of questions which were already asked by students”.

“repeated questions happens a lot”

However, there were several reported experiences of slow or absent responses (n=8) on Blackboard Discussion Boards. In some cases, module pages had an unmonitored Discussion Board or the Discussion Boards were actively disabled. This added to the negative experience of inconsistent Blackboard functionality, creating navigational difficulties for students.

From the staff perspective, barriers to the effectiveness of Blackboard for communication included the lack of email notifications for new posts or questions (leading to missed student posts), competing communication channels (Email and Teams), and unclear or inconsistent usage by students. As reported in Table 4, the audit of Blackboard Discussion Board users

estimated that approximately 10% of the student cohort engaged with this feature across all modules analysed, though this does not account for students who may engage with this feature more passively by only reading responses without posting. Engagement with Blackboard Announcements also varied considerably across modules and individual posts, from 13% to 67% of the students in a module.

Student perspective – negative:

“slow replies or no replies for days”

“replies could seem condescending, albeit some of the questions could be easily found through

“There is no need to give short and stupid answers to confused students”

“Answers sometimes came across as patronising and/or dismissive... Yes, perhaps they ought to know it, but telling them that doesn’t help anyone”

“Some modules cannot access submission in following semester/year so feedback cannot be looked at when facing similar assessments”.

Of particular concern, some students reported condescending responses from academic staff on Discussion Boards, which deterred participation and may have caused psychological discomfort. While there were occasions where staff responses to student queries on Blackboard Discussion Boards could come across as overly harsh, it was recognised by both students and staff that many student questions concerned information that was clearly available in module documentation or could be resolved through independent enquiry.

Maintaining psychological safety is important for student confidence and requires that students feel able to ask questions without fear of embarrassment or unnecessary criticism. However, higher education also has a responsibility to foster resilience, critical thinking, and independent learning. The challenge is therefore to encourage students to seek answers for themselves where appropriate, while ensuring staff respond in a respectful, compassionate, and supportive manner that promotes confidence rather than discourages engagement.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Taken together, these findings suggest not a motivational gap, but a translational gap at a cohort level. Students wish to engage with feedback, but often feel hindered by workload pressures, occasional inaccessible feedback access (after module progression) and feedback that is assignment-specific rather than transferable. Staff are motivated to support students in becoming independent learners and building resilience in a psychologically safe space, but there is an asymmetry in the visibility of their efforts.

Limitation: Survey engagement from both students and staff was limited and findings may not represent the full Life Sciences community. Student engagement was 45 out of an estimated 2,000 Life Science undergraduate students (2.25%); staff engagement was 21 out of an estimated 100 Life Science academic staff (21%). The students and staff who did not engage with the survey are arguably the key stakeholders for this project, whose insight and experience were most sought after.

Recommendations

The following initial proposals are put forward on the basis of these findings:

1. Develop and implement a standardised staff-led feedback framework that is audited and supported by senior leadership to reduce variability between markers.
2. Standardise Blackboard module layouts and keep content updated to reduce navigation difficulties and student frustration.
3. Provide clear guidance for students on how to access, interpret, and act on feedback to support independent learning.
4. Promote psychological safety in teaching and learning spaces. Train staff in constructive, respectful online communication with students.

"I try to create a non-judgmental culture in my teaching sessions. I want to build student confidence and to empower our learners to talk through difficult ideas and build their thoughts forward..." – Staff Survey

"I just want to stress that feedback is so, so important. Without it, I do feel a bit in the dark. Something that may be obvious for one person is not for the other, and we're all trying to even the field so everyone can do their best..." – Student Survey

5. References

- Bump, G.M. and Cladis, F.P. (2025) 'Psychological Safety in Medical Education, Another Challenge to Tackle?', *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 40(1), pp. 41–45. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-024-09166-y>.
- Chiriac, E.H. (2014) 'Group work as an incentive for learning – students' experiences of group work', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5.
- Edmondson, A.C.. (2024) *Right kind of wrong : how the best teams use failure to succeed*. Penguin Books.
- de Kleijn, R.A.M. (2023) 'Supporting student and teacher feedback literacy: an instructional model for student feedback processes', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 48(2). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2021.1967283>.
- Lang, J.M.. (2021) *Small teaching : everyday lessons from the science of learning*. Jossey-Bass, a Wiley imprint.
- Mcclintock, A.H., Fainstad, T.L. and Jauregui, J. (2022) 'Clinician Teacher as Leader: Creating Psychological Safety in the Clinical Learning Environment for Medical Students', *Academic Medicine*, 97(11). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000004913>.
- Mercer, M. and Gulseren, D.B. (2024) 'When negative feedback harms: a systematic review of the unintended consequences of negative feedback on psychological, attitudinal, and behavioral responses', *Studies in Higher Education*, 49(4). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2248490>.
- Middleton, R. *et al.* (2024) 'Understanding the processes, practices and influences of calibration on feedback literacy in higher education marking: A qualitative study', *Nurse Education Today*, 135. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2024.106106>.